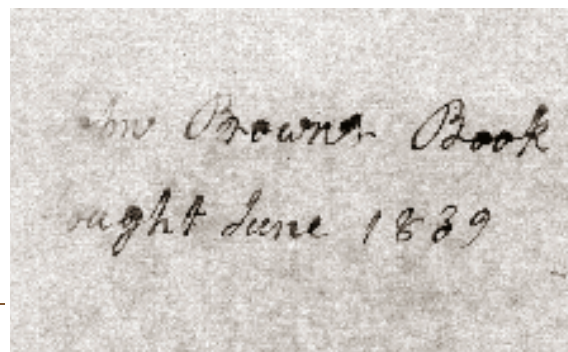


# Preserving Artifacts

## Displaying John Brown's Bible

*A reproduction of this fragile ink inscription is displayed inside the front cover of John Brown's Bible.*

**I**n 1994, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park began disassembling its primary museum, the John Brown Story, to make way for a new permanent exhibit dealing with John Brown and his 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry. In planning for only nine months, the new museum and its artifacts would have to meet an equally tight production/installation deadline: the museum opening and its ribbon-cutting ceremony featuring West Virginia Senator Robert W. Byrd and Park Service Director Roger Kennedy would be the centerpiece of the park's Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration on the July 4th weekend of 1994. Complicating the fabrication would be the inclusion of a stellar artifact acquired in 1992, John Brown's family Bible. Protecting the enormous historical, ideological, and monetary value inherent in the Bible would become the cardinal concern of the museum pro-

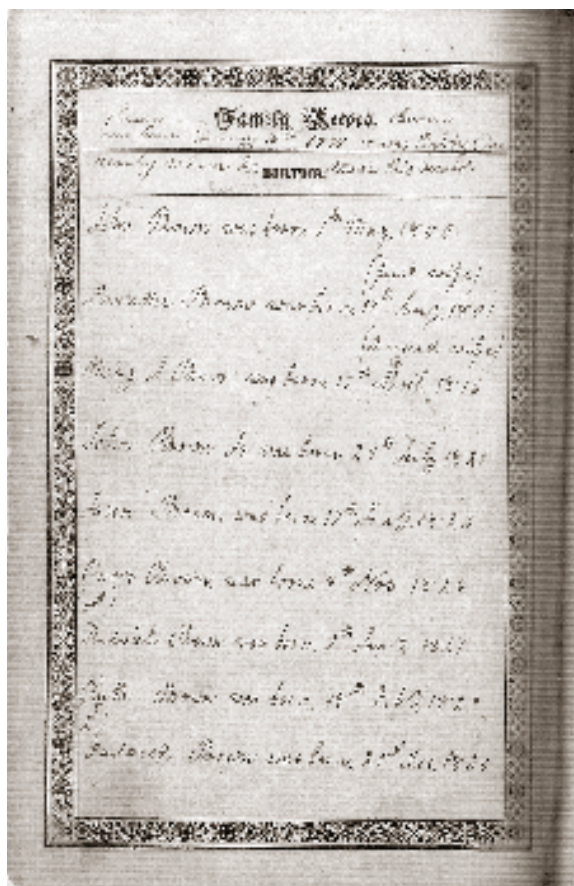


ject and the problems inherent in the display of such an item quickly overwhelmed the production schedule, making the Bible case the most conspicuous victim of the project's severe deadline. The Bible was displayed in a conventional exhibit case for the VIP opening, but was then quickly returned to a storage vault in a nearby bank while work continued on its display case. The process by which this case was created encompassed most of the concerns involved in the display of movable cultural property and proves that creativity and logic can carry the day when money and time are in short supply.

Materially, the Bible is not an exceptional artifact. It is a Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testament, bound in brown sheepskin, about 9 3/4" high by 6 1/2" wide and 2 1/2" thick. Over the course of its life it has been lightly repaired with calfskin and re-backed, and it has acquired marbled endpapers. What makes this Bible extraordinary are the markings inscribed and scribbled over its pages. "John Browns Book Bought June 1839" is inked on the front flyleaf. Between the Old and New Testaments are four pages reserved for family records of births, deaths, and marriages. These pages are filled with ink and pencil entries and most of the famous members of John Brown's family circle are mentioned. The most poignant entry is the last, a terse record of "Bleeding Kansas" from the abolitionist perspective: "Frederick Brown 2d was Murdered at Osawatimie in Kansas Aug 30th 1856 Aged 26 years." Throughout the Bible appear pencil marks ranging from bold "X"s and complete circling of passages to slight, possibly accidental, jots of the pencil. These inscriptions are personal souvenirs of the Brown family history (virtually the only ones in our park) and some of the delineated passages are compelling evidence for our interpretive assertion that the Brown family's religious beliefs and political philosophy were inseparable.

Books can be difficult objects to preserve. The typical book is a small bundle of assorted organic materials: paper, leather, cardboard, glue, ink, string. Most of these materials absorb water and change size as they do so. This absorption

*Both illustrations show handwritten inscriptions from John Brown's family Bible, which is on display in the John Brown Museum in Harpers Ferry NHP.*



occurs at a different rate for each material, so as the relative humidity in the surrounding air changes, the different materials tend to rub or to pull away from each other. The typical book also constitutes a smorgasbord for the museum pest. Virtually all harmful life-forms, from mold to lice to foraging rats, can find something to eat in a book.

Fragile objects of great significance present museums with a problem. The high cultural and/or monetary value of an artifact usually heightens the pressure to take every feasible step to ensure its preservation, but, paradoxically, this significance also heightens the pressure to keep the artifact on exhibit indefinitely, so that it may be seen by as many people as possible (a pressure that is greater still for a federal museum serving tax-payers). Preparing the Bible for exhibition was an act of juggling these sometimes contradictory demands of exhibition and preservation.

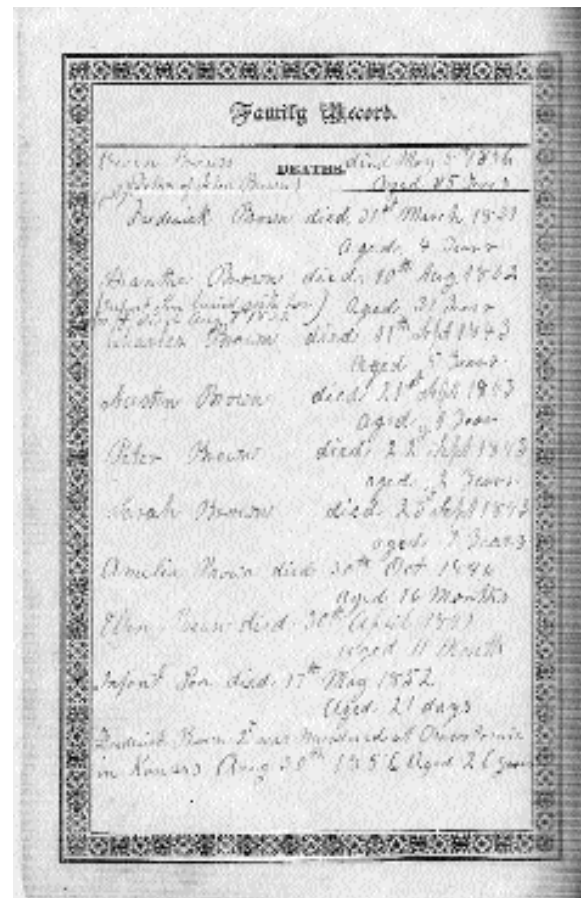
An artifact of this sensitivity needs a state-of-the-art exhibit environment which the reconstructed museum buildings could not provide. Some of the conditions of the building (its vulnerable windows; its limited HVAC system) are among the greatest threats to the Bible's preservation. The challenge to Harpers Ferry Center's Division of Conservation, the National Capital area's Curatorial Services Division, and our own park staff, was to present the production team with parameters for an exhibit case that would be a little world unto itself, a stable micro-environment implanted into the changeable atmosphere of the building. For preservation purposes, the case would have to be dark, but the Bible must still be lit well enough to permit reading. The case atmosphere would have to be sealed, but constantly monitored. Security concerns dictated a case resembling a locked vault to which only a handful could have access, yet must also be easily removable when the inevitable floods arrive. It had to be behind numerous doors (which must not hide the Bible) and have its own sprinkler head (which, if activated, must not get the Bible wet).

Numerous ideas were floated by NPS professionals and contractors, many of them excessively expensive and complicated. Two cases, a "day-time" for viewing and a "night-time" for security, were a component of most of the proposals, but these involved manual or electronic handling of the Bible, a daily risk that negated all benefits. One proposal called for a sealed case mounted on a hydraulic piston that in the event of flood would lower the Bible into a water-tight crypt beneath the basement. It became apparent early on that too many "state-of-the-art" mechanisms were being installed into one small exhibit case and all parties were encouraged to find lower-tech and lower-

maintenance solutions. The set-up eventually agreed upon was actually a bundle of ingenious, common-sense solutions to specific logistical problems, rather than the expensive case/machine that was originally envisioned.

The first step involved extending some aspects of the micro-environment beyond the walls of the case itself by "alcoving" the case and making components of the alcove's structure provide some of the safety features. To keep the case from looking like "a-fish-tank-in-a-wall," the alcove was multi-surfaced, the case-glass lowered and slanted, and the Bible displayed low and open, all subtly enhancing the artifact's three-dimensionality. Luckily, the Bible's spine was sound enough to allow for open viewing, and both the front page and page 43 (which bears some interesting pencil markings) can be displayed long-term without endangering the spine. Recessing the case in an alcove made it easier both to isolate the Bible from the light in the room and to provide the case with an independent light source. As the ink inscription on the front endpaper was highly susceptible to light (a conservator would say that the ink is "fugitive") a high-quality copy of the inscription was printed on suitable paper and placed over the original (the press-printed text of the book is quite stable and should hold up well under the current lighting).

*The last inscription on this list of Brown family deaths calls attention to the shooting of Frederick Brown by pro-slavery forces in Kansas in 1856.*






This fire-resistant, water-shielding capacity of the alcove allowed for a more standardized safety-vault construction for the Bible case itself, with the modifications of such a vault being made for display and environmental control purposes.

At first glance, it may seem that acquiring a valuable artifact like the John Brown Bible would be nothing but a feather in the cap of a collecting institution, but high-profile exhibit items also place great responsibilities on public museums, parks, galleries, and aquariums and zoos. Such exhibits often bring heightened security risks, rigorous conservation demands, and increased visitation and traffic. Institutions must often strain their budgets and staffs if they accept the challenge to meet these demands and can expect bad publicity and a loss of public trust if they do not. Working with the John Brown Bible has been a bit daunting at times for all concerned, yet being able to work with an artifact of this significance, a book once pored over and prayed over by John Brown, has also been a privilege, and the challenge brought out the best in everyone involved. While the success of today's efforts can only be proved by years of monitoring and testing, the Bible has certainly had the benefit of some of the best museum practices and practitioners that the National Park Service has to offer, all intent on preserving this paper and leather testament to the mind and spirit of John Brown for future generations.

# JOHN BROWN

## AT HARPERS FERRY



Prof. Henry T. McDonald, President Storer College  
Harpers Ferry, W. Va.

Town Hall, Fairmont Heights, Md.

Friday, April 25, 1913. 8 P. M.

**ADMISSION - 10 CENTS**

*John Brown speech poster for speech by Henry I. McDonald delivered at Fairmount Heights, MD, April 25, 1913. Courtesy Harpers Ferry NHP.*

Temperature and humidity inside the case are also monitored remotely. A tiny sensor in the